

APRIL 5, 1984

At the time of this writing, winds are tearing the Shortgrass Country apart. Gusts reaching 65 miles an hour are overtaking gales blowing 50 or so an hour. Surface soil is rising airborne, blending into dust that's coming from the Plains. The roof on the tin storeroom close to my ranch house has wobbled and bucked until the pitch of the roof has changed to fluffed metal. I flinch every time the tin screeches, or the north wall gives to the forces. The attic appears to be inflated, and the rattle of windows and wires batting against the house is at high decibels.

Added to this drama is a bell outside the kitchen that rings and rocks in the high winds. Several summers ago I hung it to keep the lady that cooks for us from having to walk down to the barn to deliver telephone summons or maybe report a stopped up sink.

The drama is on me. The bell is seasoned and experienced in bad weather. The guy I bought it from said that a religious order from Spain brought the casting across the ocean to hang in a belfry in a mission church close to Santa Fe, N.M. Once hung in the belfry, he said, it tolled deaths, celebrated marriages, and heralded holy baptisms. Nothing went on for decades in the plaza the bell overlooked that it wasn't the master of introduction.

In the course of the transaction, I happened to find an inscription underneath the lip of this fine bell that said "Montgomery Ward." The salesman said that although he no longer had the bill of lading from Spain, it explained that a scoundrel English buccaneer had once stolen the bell and inscribed those Anglo words to honor his home place in England. Tears came to the salesman's eyes as he assured me that this bell was like brushing against the core of the history and flavor and conquest of the 17th century.

I was back at the ranch before I realized that the most historic part for me was meeting such a well organized New Mexico antique dealer. In fact, about four months cooling period had to pass before I felt like hanging the bell. I don't know for sure, but I think that scoundrel English buccaneer had a minor role in the tale.

The winds are going to hurt our lambing operations. When we stopped feeding the sheep we had about a 5.5 day margin. Last week we gained a few days after a dew that trickled down halfway on the short blades of grass. Once this fury is over, all that will be undone. The past nine hours of high velocity winds have cut back every trace of greenery.

Cattle won't look like any worse than before the storm. The long hard winter has trimmed them down until the weight of their heads and horns will push their rear ends into the wind just like a windmill works. If you ever get a chance, and don't believe me, you'll find out that fat cattle will have mud balls up under their eyes from facing the wind; an old drouthy sister may have her eyes sunk deep in her head, but she won't show one mud codlet.

By nightfall the worst will be over. I'm glad that bell salesman doesn't publish his customer list. I'm enough of a business disgrace without that scam being of printed record.